

Blogging to Win Hearts and Minds

By Diane Vanderpot, Colonel, USA

Editorial Abstract: Colonel Vanderpot looks at the impact of military blogging, to include issues ranging from potential operations security and force protection vulnerabilities, to soldiers' personal enrichment needs. With proper blogging guidelines, plus common sense, she suggests blogs offer a potential information operations force multiplier.

<http://blog.al.com/afghanistan/2007/10/security.html>

31 October 2007

Security

Posted by Michael Tomberlin
October 25, 2007 8:00 AM

It is a basic need for everyone, including us here at Camp Vulcan. Continuing our tour around the camp, next stop is the force protection measures. A lot of time and materials have been used providing us with fighting positions, bunkers and barriers that provide both physical protection and an emotional piece of mind. I will not go into detail for operational security reasons, but the ongoing expansion of Camp Vulcan has given us a number of dismounted fighting positions and mounted fighting positions where we can drive a Humvee up to the wall and use the crew-served weapon mounted in the turret to fight off the enemy. To protect us against mortars and rockets the enemy may use to shell us, we have concrete bunkers reinforced with sandbags. Dirt filled Hesco barriers surround our barracks, recreation building, TOCs, bathrooms and even our generators. The large Hesco barriers that surround Camp Vulcan are topped with rolls of concertina wire. We have multiple gates at our new entry control point to prevent anyone from driving or walking into the Camp Vulcan. All of this, and Camp Vulcan sits inside an Afghan National Army FOB, with its own barriers, guard towers and the like. Needless to say, we feel pretty safe inside the walls here. That's how we define "security" here at Camp Vulcan. It's funny, because this time last year, in my nice job and comfortable home, I would have described security differently.



"The view from one of our dismounted fighting positions at Camp Vulcan."



"Bunkers and barriers surround our barracks and bathrooms."



"Mounted fighting positions are designed to drive a Humvee into place."

The Blogger

MAJ Michael Tomberlin posted the security entry into his blog "Yellowhammering Afghanistan" on 25 October 2007. Does it give away critical force protection information like the distance between a Hasco barrier and living areas? Can the Taliban use any of this information to attack Camp Vulcan? This article examines Operations Security (OPSEC) and military blogs—which can be a double edged sword. It focuses on the positive aspects of blogs like getting a first hand account of what happened in a fight and winning over America's hearts and support. It also discusses some negative aspects, like providing classified information, divulging current tactics or embarrassing the US military.

Blogs are an outlet for people to post journal entries. Deployed soldiers writing blogs must fully comprehend the potential audience of their words and pictures before hitting the send button. MAJ Tomberlin's entry may appear interesting, and provide insight to the quality of life at Camp Vulcan to his intended readers, most probably family and friends. But a foe may be able to find these pictures and descriptions, use them to build a diagram of Camp Vulcan, and discover vulnerabilities in force protection.

Why Soldiers Blog

Military blogs are the soldier's most modern way to communicate. Soldiers deployed to war have always sent letters home describing their living conditions, the actions they have participated in, the lousy food, their emotions as they watch fellow warriors die, and how much they miss home. Today's soldiers are no different, the tools they have to communicate with friends and family allow almost instantaneous

information to flow. The Internet makes communicating easier, it's faster to type and change mistakes than writing letters, and email is weeks quicker than the postal system.

Concurrently with the beginning of war in Iraq, blogging became a popular way of expressing one's feelings about any subject. Young soldiers, who always seem to be on the cutting edge of technology, found it easy to communicate outside the bounds of their camps by typing blogs. Blogging gives them an opportunity to communicate their experiences to outsiders, and provide more detail and a counter perspective to the media. They see what the main media networks present to viewers back home, and realize the stories are packaged based on the network's bias and on what will attract viewers.

Soldiers want the American public to know the real story. Corporal Michael Bautista, a machine-gunner based in Kirkuk said it this way: "It kind of transformed itself from a desire to convey my personal experience into letting people know the real story. I think the main coverage that you'll see at home is this car bomb blew up; this amount of people died. I think my main effort now is more toward showing that this is a good thing that we've done, regardless of... what political decisions were made to get us here. This is a just cause, and that it is— it's a righteous endeavor. That's part of why I write. If I'm given an opportunity to say it, by God, I will. We have done a good thing."

Milbloggers want to share their experiences as lessons learned and advice to other soldiers. The Army maintains official websites for lessons learned, requiring units to provide after action comments to be incorporated for future use in developing tactics, techniques and procedures. Young soldiers, however, are more interested in the 'down and dirty' from like peers. Their peers will give the low down to soldiers preparing for deployment on what they can expect.

Less than one percent of the American population serves in the military today and blogs help amplify the military

message of trust, camaraderie and valor to a nation with no combat experience. The on-the-scene perspective written by the amateur journalist/soldier whose words are candid and sometimes colorful seem more credible than the official pronouncement from either Baghdad or the Pentagon. Journalist Ralph Peters notes "The best blogs offer a taste of reality of Iraq or Afghanistan that the new media rarely capture. And they're often a grand, irreverent hoot."

Stories from soldiers's blogs have mesmerized America with first person accounts of heartfelt agony, sorrow, pride and strength. Blogs make the war more real. Brown University held a conference entitled, "Front Line, First Person: Iraq War during October 2007." The conference brought together soldiers, journalists, and academics to try to understand ground-level experiences in Iraq and why so few of these stories get out to the American public. Many of the speakers concluded that first person accounts are the most honest, but may not be fully appreciated by a public who has no basis of comprehension. However, the more informed public may have more support and trust in their military.

Who Reads Blogs?

According to *Technorati*, a tracking engine for Internet sites, in October 2007 there were 109.7 million total active blogs, and of those 3835 were active military blogs. Blogs are updated regularly, with approximately 1.6 million entries added daily. Milblogging.com currently indexes 1,839 military blogs in 32 countries with 4,040 registered members. Milblogging.com puts finding frontline stories at your fingertips, highlighting the best military sites and listing the 'top 100' blogs.

These types of sites alert other bloggers to false stories, and help quickly discount them. The blogger community, or blogosphere, is to a large degree self-policing. Milblogs are frequently linked to other milblogs and members frequently comment on each others' stories. It is natural to check out what others who have commonality are writing. This readership helps police

those who tend to embellish their war stories.

Sometimes, the soldier gets caught up in his desires to become famous. This is the case for Private Scott Beauchamp who was writing blogs for the New Republic's "Baghdad Diarist." Under a pseudonym, Private Beauchamp wrote stories "telling of outrageous behavior by US troops belittling a woman scarred by an IED, wearing a skull fragment from the remains of a child found in one of Saddam's mass graves, and intentionally trying to kill dogs with armored vehicles." Michael Goldfarb, editor of the *Worldwide Standard*, thought the stories were fishy. He recruited the greater blogosphere to determine the reliability of Beauchamp's claims. Within days he received ten responses from military personnel who were disgusted by these claims, and gave solid explanations why they were lies. The US Army completed an investigation of Private Beauchamp, and found all his allegations to be false. The investigating officer stated Beauchamp took small bits of truth, twisted and exaggerated them into fictional accounts, then put them forth as 'the whole truth' for public consumption.

Interestingly, this story did not hurt the military. Readers quickly saw through the fabrication and questioned the author and asked for verification. Unfortunately the *New Republic* believed. Even with others questioning the story's validity, the editors did not investigate these allegations, and stood by their story. The *New Republic* currently has no record of Beauchamp's stories posted on their website.

Safeguarding Information on Military Blogs

Army policy now requires Soldiers to inform their chain of command of their milblogs. In August 2005, Army Chief of Staff General Peter Schoomaker sent guidance to the field requiring that Army leaders make their subordinates aware of how enemies exploits sensitive information and images on the Web. Downloaded photos of M-1 Abrams tanks penetrated by an RPG [rocket-

propelled grenade] can easily become training and recruitment tools for the enemy. For the most part soldiers abided the directive, and closed down their blogs. CPL Bautista said he received tacit approval from his platoon leader who reviewed what Bautista wrote. The corporal understood as long as he did not comment on Army policy, politics or issues that may have operational security risks, he could write what he wanted.

Sergeant Major of the Army Kenneth Preston addresses this issue on his website. He states that Al Qaeda proclaims they derive 80 percent of the information in their terrorist handbooks from open sources, and soldiers writing sensitive information on blogs are helping Al Qaeda kill fellow soldiers.

According to MAJ Elizabeth Robbins, a public affairs officer for Multi-National Force-Iraq, the Army cannot effectively mandate that its personnel refrain from all public communications. To do so the Army would have to stop all communication means to soldiers' family and friends. MAJ Robbins points out that private soldiers' communications to family members, who subsequently make inadvertent or intentional public statements, are the primary source of leaked sensitive information.

The Army recently revised Regulation AR-530-1, *Operations Security*. It states all personnel must prevent disclosure of critical and sensitive information in any public domain to include, but not limited to, the World Wide Web. It details examples of what is considered sensitive: improved explosive device strikes; battle scenes; casualties; destroyed or damaged equipment; personnel killed in action, both friendly and adversary; and the protective measures of military facilities. The regulation also directs commanders to properly implement OPSEC procedures, and ensure appropriate controls on information posted to the Internet.

Further, Multinational Corps-Iraq established a policy specifically directed at military members posting blogs. It lists five types of prohibited information: classified information, casualty information before next-of-kin notification, information protected by the Privacy Act, information regarding

incidents under ongoing investigation and For Official Use Only information. Soldiers serving in MNC-I must also register their websites with their respective chains of command.

All these directives are difficult to sort through. Many soldiers have chosen to close their blogs in order not to violate policy. One deployed military blogger, who elected to stop blogging rather than face the scrutiny of command, wrote "Operational security continues to be an issue for our Armed Forces. Therefore, it is with heavy heart that I must back away from the blogging community... I pray that I have been able to shed some light on the everyday events that our men and women overseas deal with... into their struggles and triumphs... What I do, I do willingly out of respect for our leaders and love for our Soldiers."

Way Ahead For Milbloggers


Military blogs pose challenges to operational security, but they have also provided incredibly positive information. The official military information campaign struggles with how it tells the American public what is happening in the war. The media tells the angle they want to portray, but deployed military bloggers tell first person stories from the heart. Support and popularity of their following is cult-like.

Gary Trudeau, the creator of *Doonesbury*, has collaborated with several military bloggers to create a

book, *In The Sandbox*. This book is a compilation of blog entries from service members deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. Trudeau notes the military called it "[a] hotwash," and "it's the kind of first-person journalism that you really can't find anywhere else."

This kind of marketing makes more people aware of military blog sites, and helps sell a positive image of the military. It is using information operations to win the hearts and minds at home.

When soldiers are told the importance of observing operational security in terms of protecting themselves and their buddies, they understand and usually comply. The boundaries and rules for military blogging are new, yet military bloggers tend to police themselves and demand truth in writing. They can exert pressure on non-compliers. Commanders and supervisors have responsibilities to conduct OPSEC training for Internet forums, and to ensure such guidance is understood and occasionally checked.

Most importantly, the rewards of well written, accurate portrayals of daily life in the combat zone will be a force multiplier to information operations. 

Bibliography/references for this article are on the IO Sphere Home Page at: <https://www.jiowc.osis.gov/Publications/IOSphere/index.cfm> Click on the "updates" link under the Spring 2008 issue.